

TT No. 155: *Andy Gallon* - Tue 24th February 2009; **AFC Liverpool** v Chadderton; Vodkat Division One Trophy Rd 3; Res: 3-2; Att: 121; Admission: £5; Programme: £1.50 (48pp); FGIF Match Rating: ****.

This is not Anfield. Being Prescott, it's not even Liverpool. Perhaps if I'd been priced out of watching my team, or found it impossible to obtain tickets, I'd be able to get my head round the appeal of 'by the fans, for the fans' clubs such as AFC Liverpool. The self-proclaimed 'little brother' of the 'real' Reds was set up last summer to fill a void in the lives of those for whom visits to Anfield were no longer an option. It provided an outlet to remain part of what the new club describes, with cloying sentimentality, as the 'community of Reds'. Where will it end? Are we to see this pattern repeated at every Premier League club, and the lower reaches of the pyramid scattered with the likes of AFC Aston Villa and AFC Newcastle United? Why don't such disenfranchised fans turn their backs on the terminally tainted professional game, and walk down the road to watch their local non-league team? Even as someone who was a fairly regular presence on The Kop during mid-1980s university days in Liverpool, I don't understand it. But I acknowledge everyone is at liberty, in football as in life, to do as they please, and as far as AFC Liverpool is concerned, there was the will among unhappy fans to find a way.

That way led to the North West Counties League First Division, and a groundshare at Valerie Park with UniBond Leaguers Prescott Cables. And, so far, it's been pretty good. The team is on top of the table, and attendances, for this league, have been impressive. Initial projections of 1,000-plus crowds - possibly based on the AFC United of Manchester model - proved hopelessly optimistic, but an average of about 350 is not too far off what is needed to cover weekly expenses. The rather dismal attendance for this exciting game marked the first occasion the crowd had slipped below 200, and may have had something to do with the relatively uninspiring Vodkat Division One Trophy (a 'stocking filler' competition, if ever I saw one) and the return of live Champions League football to the telly.

Most of the pubs in Prescott's tiny, unattractive town centre displayed placards advertising big screen coverage of the following evening's European clash between Real Madrid and Liverpool. And one of the red-brick terraced houses on Hope Street, which leads down to Valerie Park's turnstiles from the A57, had a large Liverpool FC badge fixed to the glass window in its front door. Enough, then, to make any member of the wider community of Reds feel at home. Even though 'home' is eight miles away in (actual) Liverpool. I'd been to Valerie Park, to watch football and rugby league, several times, and had always rated it an interesting ground. Opened in 1906, its location, secreted amid an awkward jumble of grimy industrial premises, traditional terraced houses, and new builds squeezed into pocket handkerchiefs of waste ground, is intriguing. Its facilities, which include a splendid 1950s-vintage main stand in a capacity of 3,200, are better than might be expected.

Hope Street, a two-minute walk from the town centre, slopes down to a T junction, beyond which are the turnstiles and attractive wrought-iron main gates. The size of the turnstile block, which boasts four entrances, is a reminder of the days when the ground attracted crowds of up to 8,000. There are no permanent signs advertising the presence of AFC Liverpool. The stand behind the near goal, topping a rise, is a curious affair. It is squat and deep, covers three broad steps of terracing, and stops abruptly the minute it reaches the goal. A bit Raith Rovers-ish. The remainder of this end is open terracing, of which there are seven steps leading to a grassy plateau. To the right, a flagged hardstanding path runs down the side of the pitch, which is enclosed by a post and rail barrier painted white and filled in with red boards. In the near-right corner, Halsall Street's renovated terraced houses, and their back gardens, are hard up against the wire mesh boundary fence. This is covered with giant flags, which seem to captivate fans of this sort of club. They may not be able to afford tickets for Anfield, but they can shell out on a flag the size of a duvet. Mmm. Halsall Street peels off at an angle, and a widening triangle of land created has been grassed, and is used for training. Beyond is a factory, more audible than visible in the gloom. The gentle hiss of escaping steam is soothing. From this side, look over to the left, and the elegant (floodlit this evening) spire of the surprisingly beautiful red sandstone parish church of St Mary's can be spotted above the rooftops. The far end has a single step of terracing to supplement the hardstanding path, and a grassy bank climbs to an attractive belt of trees (possibly poplars), which run the width of the pitch behind an area of tangled scrub and a battered perimeter fence. For every grassy bank dotted about, there is a sign telling you to keep off.

So, for an elevated view, you need to try the main stand, Valerie Park's pride and joy, and its focal point. This awesome structure, gaunt, towering and positioned between the edges of the penalty areas, is very similar to those of a similar vintage at Morecambe, Chorley, King's Lynn and the rugby league and speedway stadium at Workington. Three broad steps of terracing form a small paddock. A well-appointed social club, with a bar, toilets and a table selling AFC Liverpool souvenirs, takes up much of the 'below stairs' segment. The far end is given over to the dressing rooms, with the players emerging from an offset caged 'tunnel'. Next to a refreshment hatch, enclosed metal steps take you up to the seating tier. Six rows of plastic tip-up seats (a haphazard mixture of red, white, green and blue) run the length of the stand, which has a press box positioned centrally at the rear. The layout is identical to that at Derwent Park, Workington, and the view of a sticky, lumpy pitch equally sublime. A small tarmac parking area, accessed by a metallised track winding round from the entrance gates, can be found at the back of the stand. Beyond the boundary fence is a cluster of whitewashed huts, hatches battened down and windows grilled to repel boarders, which is the headquarters of the Merseyside army cadet force of Two Royal Tank Regiment. The stand, in common with its neighbour at the town end, has been re-clad in dark green metal corrugated sheeting. It may be austere, but it's smart and tidy. The floodlights are masts, with four per side and two lamps on each. Things were not always so

shipshape here. This ground has improved a good deal in recent years as Prescott Cables have climbed the pyramid.

Well, the stayaways missed a cracking cup tie. A place in the semi-finals, and a two-legged contest with Norton United, was up for grabs, and both teams, to use the modern parlance, clearly 'wanted it'. Four goals, two at each end, meant a pulsating first 24 minutes. Ian Sheridan, sent through by a nicely weighted Andy Olsen pass, put the hosts, wearing a strip commemorating those who died in the Hillsborough Disaster 20 years ago, ahead in the eighth minute. He took the ball round keeper Ben Aspinall, and, though forced a little wide, was able to drill a low shot past a couple of backtracking defenders. I was still purring over this show of excellence when Chadderton equalised in the 13th minute with a goal whose execution was even more dazzling. Chris Pauley floated over a free-kick from the left, and Daniel Shaw, unmarked beyond the back post, connected perfectly with a volley which looped over keeper Jack Baker and into the opposite top corner. Anfield? Fernando Torres? Who needs them?

Dave Eaton restored Little Brother's lead with 21 minutes on the clock. He was given the freedom to break down the middle and, picking his spot, found a gap between Aspinall's left-hand and the upright from 20 yards. Chaddy were back on terms within three minutes. Baker made a dreadful hash of a first-time clearance, and Paul Socha, loitering with intent inside the penalty area, crashed the ball straight back over his head and into the roof of the net. Game on.

In the 28th minute, Brad Warburton was inches away from putting AFC Liverpool 3-2 up with a well-struck effort following patient play down the inside right channel. What proved to be the winner arrived four minutes after the restart. Mark Bloxam rose well to meet a Craig Cushion free-kick from the left, and his glancing header from 12 yards found the net off the inside of a post. The pace wasn't quite as relentless in the second half, but the visitors from Oldham contributed fully to an end-to-end battle. Andrew Pheoby, who was dogged by cramp, twice went close to forcing extra-time, but wasted sitters at the back post. Aspinall prevented AFC from putting the outcome beyond reasonable doubt when, with 11 minutes left, he dived to parry a fierce Sheridan drive - a superb reflex-save.

AFC Liverpool will not, it seems, be a one-season wonder. They intend to see out the 2008-09 campaign at Valerie Park, and, in all likelihood, will be playing there in 2009-10. Liverpool City Council, doubtless keen to demonstrate, post-Hatton, they still have the common touch, want to see the club move closer to what might be described as its roots, and have made offers of a home nearer home. AFC might have started out with 'not for profit' intentions, but it's clear they cannot run at a loss, and it seems important discussions, of a 'where do we want to go and how will we get there' nature, will take place over the summer. The club's 'Football for a Fiver' slogan does appeal to a certain number of economically challenged Liverpool fans, but will it ever attract enough to make the project work long-term? Valerie Park, physically and spiritually, is a long way from Anfield. And always will be.

